

## Degree Outcomes Statement

### 1 Institutional degree classification profile

The University of Worcester has seen a 0.8 percentage increase in the proportion of first-class Honors degrees awarded over the last 5 years, and a 2.5 percentage point decrease in the proportion of 1 and 2:1 degrees over the same period. The proportions of both first and upper second-degree classifications increased in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years, compared with 2019/20 academic year, which may be associated with the ‘safety net’ processes put in place to deal with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Data for 2022/23 suggests the start of a return to pre-pandemic levels (see below).

The profile for each of the 5 years can be seen in the table below. Note that 22/23 totals are provided from internal data and will be updated once HESA figures are published in early 2024. The 21/22 totals have been updated since September 2022 following publication of new HESA degree classification data in July 2023.

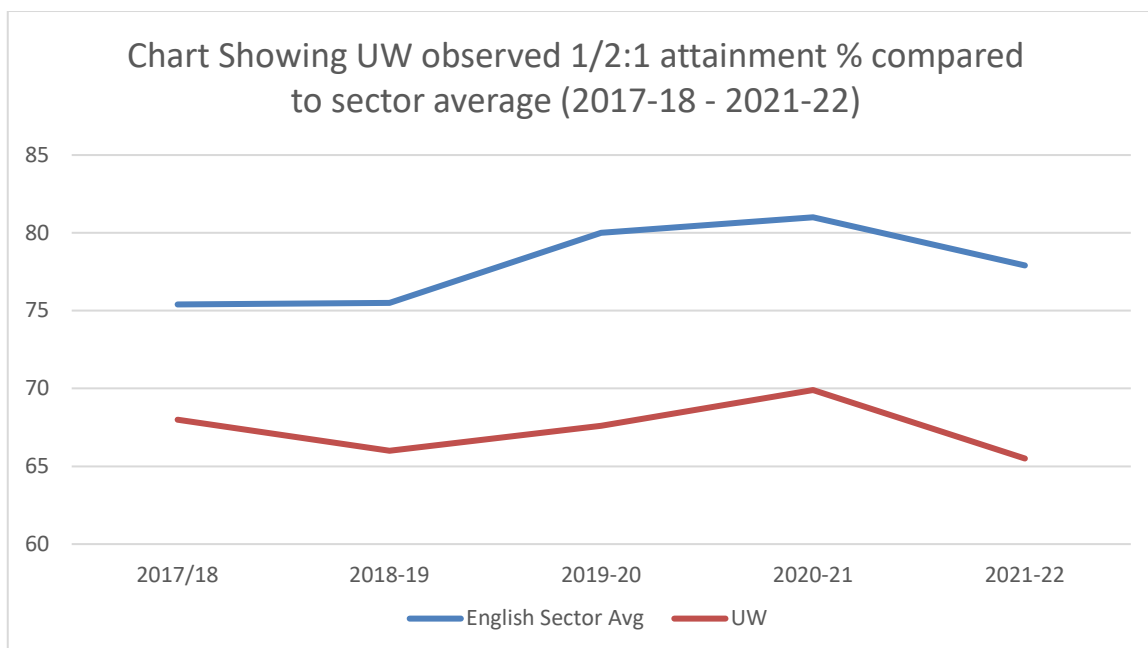
Academic Year	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23
Proportion of First-Class degrees (%)	21.1	19.6	21.4	23.9	21.9
Proportion of First/Upper Second-Class degrees (%)	68.0	66.0	67.6	69.6	65.5

[Data taken from workbooks associated with OfS publication July 2023.](#)

Annually since 2018, the OfS has published the outcomes of statistical modelling to assess the extent to which increases/decreases in the proportion of upper Hons classification can be accounted for by prior attainment and subject studied. The aim is to account for sector-wide factors including entrance qualifications and student characteristics which may influence attainment.

The OfS assesses for each provider the extent to which and changes in classification outcomes are ‘unexplained’. The latest analysis (July 2023) suggested that the University saw a reduction in the ‘unexplained’ attainment of 1 and 2:1 degrees from 6.2% in 2011/12 to 5.0% in 2021/22, placing the University 125 out of 144 institutions, very much at the lower end of the scale in terms of unexplained increases. This is in comparison to an ‘unexplained’ figure of 11.2% at sector level for 2021/22.

It should be noted, as is evident from the graph below, that the proportion of 1 and 2:1 Awards made by the University (69.6% in 2021/22) is consistently below the sector average 77.9% in 2021/22. This is influenced by the average entry qualifications of our students, their social characteristics and our subject mix. It is also likely to be impacted by our methodology for degree classifications (see below for further discussion).



The long term (since 2010) increase in 1 and 2:1 degree classifications coincides with a move on the part of the University to become more selective in student recruitment, whilst also strengthening its commitment to widening participation in a period of growth. Thus, over the period between 2010/11 and 2017/18 the number of University graduates increased by over 60% and they were more highly qualified in terms of average UCAS points on entry. Even in recent years where the context has been more competitive regarding recruitment, the average UCAS points on entry have been increasing (114 in 2021, 124 in 2022 and 129 in 2023) <sup>2</sup>.

As identified in our Access and Participation Plan, we are aware of attainment gaps and have targets to narrow these in relation to entry qualifications, ethnicity, socio-economic disadvantage and age. The work we have undertaken to date in analysing the distribution of outcomes across different student groups (data mentioned in the following pertains to internal data), indicates that:

- Students who enter with BTEC qualifications (approximately 18% of undergraduate entrants in 2022/23) do less well in terms of degree outcome than students who enter with A level qualifications
- Students from under-represented groups, including those from lower participation neighborhoods (approximately 33% of entrants from POLAR4 quintiles 1 & 2) and BME students (approximately 18% of undergraduate entrants 2022/23) and mature students (approximately 41% of undergraduate entrants in 2022/23) do less well in terms of degree outcomes. Our targets for narrowing these gaps and associated action can be found in our [Access and Participation Plan 2020-2025](#)
- The degree profile for students in different subject areas varies across the University and we are doing work to understand how this variation compares with the sector as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Guardian League Table 2022, 2023 and 2024 (note based on average tariff score for those aged under 21)

The statistical analysis above of the changes in proportions of first and upper second-class awards made in the last five years, includes the recent pandemic years. We made some changes to the regulations in the two pandemic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 which are summarised below:

- 2020/21 saw all assessments moving fully online between May and September. The University did not adopt a ‘no-detriment’ policy, but instead provided a ‘safety net’ approach allowing students to defer assessments and to have an additional reassessment opportunity. External examiner reports confirmed academic standards were met and, in many cases, commended this approach.
- 2021/22 saw a continuation of principles established in the previous year, with the ‘safety net’ approach allowing uncapped reassessment continuing alongside a pragmatic approach to mitigating circumstances and a continued emphasis on the approach already built into assessment practices and policy. External examiner reports continued to reflect positively on this approach.

These changes appear to have had some marginal impact on the achievement of 1 and 2:1 degrees, and in particular for first class awards. This may be associated in part to some changes to assessment practice, including unseen to seen examinations, additional time to complete assessments, and some relaxation on the standards of evidence for uncapped reassessments.

In 2021/22 and 2022/23, there were no adjustments to regulations related to Covid, except through the normal provisions of the mitigating circumstances procedures. The statistical analysis shows that it is the proportion of First-Class Honours awarded that has shown an increase over the last four years. We are also very aware that there is significant variation across our range of subjects in grade profile outcomes, such that some subjects have significantly higher proportions of first-class grades awarded than do others. We are pleased that external examiners are beginning to engage with issues of ‘grade inflation’ in their reports, and from 2023/24 will explicitly ask them to comment on classification profiles.

Where there is evidence of inflation of first-class awards at course level, we ask course teams to review their assessment and grade criteria to ensure first class marks are aligned with University descriptors that are based on the sector recognized standards and descriptors.

## **2 Assessment and marking practices**

All undergraduate programmes within the University are subject to a single set of [University regulations](#) to ensure consistent decision-making and equity in outcomes for students. In addition the University has a well-established [Assessment Policy](#). This provides a comprehensive statement of the requirements that govern the design and management of student assessment and marking processes to ensure these meet sector expectations. The University Regulations and the Assessment Policy apply equally to awards delivered through partnership arrangements.

The University utilises a literal grade, rather than a percentage-based, system of marking. This has the advantage of enabling and encouraging marks to be awarded across the full grade scale without the false precision of very granular numerical marking, or the cliff edge of ‘borderlines’.

The University’s quality processes for course approval and review utilise external expertise in line with the UK Quality Code to assure academic standards. All course approvals and reviews therefore include external academic advisers with subject expertise to confirm appropriate engagement with – and alignment to – relevant sector reference points including the OfS sector recognized standards, FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, and PSRB requirements.

All courses are required to publish, for students, assessment and grade criteria that are referenced to the [University generic grade descriptors](#), that were developed following the publication of the Outcome classification descriptions for Level 6<sup>3</sup>, (and which are now incorporated into the OfS Sector recognised standards).

External examiner arrangements are managed according to the principles and procedures set out in the University's [Regulations for the Appointment of External Examiners](#). All external examiner reports received in 2022 and those received to date for 2023 confirmed that standards set were appropriate and that student outcomes were comparable to other degree awarding bodies. There was one exception to this in 2022, which was addressed through re-marking and additional moderation of students work. Additionally, all external examiners confirmed the rigour and fairness of the management of the process of determining grades and student outcomes.

### **3 Academic governance**

[Academic Board](#) is the central University Committee with oversight of all matters relating to academic regulations, standards and quality. Authority is delegated to key sub-committees, most pertinently the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC) and the Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee (LTSEC). These Committees receive regular reports on key metrics and stakeholder feedback.

An overall report on quality and standards is presented to Academic Board members, and to the Board of Governors, annually, in the autumn. This report draws together data on student outcomes (including analysis by School of degree classification outcomes and changes year on year), student feedback, outlines the work undertaken through internal and external review of the quality and standards of taught degree and research degree programmes, and provides a summary of the main themes from external examiner reports.

The University has a well embedded annual evaluation process that operates at course, School and University levels with a view to ensuring the maintenance of academic standards and identifying opportunities for quality enhancement.

Course annual evaluation reports are considered through School-level scrutiny processes to ensure they are appropriately rigorous and set clear actions to address any identified issues. Course reports feed into School evaluation and development plans. These are reviewed by College Learning, Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committees. This process concludes with ASQEC, at its January meeting, considering reports from the Head of Academic Quality and from College Directors on the effectiveness and outcomes of the process. This process applies equally to courses delivered through partnership arrangements.

### **4 Classification algorithms**

All students must achieve 360 credits in order to successfully achieve an Honours award. Students have an automatic right to reassessment for any failed module and can repeat the module and take a further reassessment if necessary, but all such grades are capped. Similarly, grades are capped for late submissions, an outcome that can only be reversed where there is an accepted case for mitigating circumstances.

Like many universities, we do not include the first-year module marks into a student's final degree classification. In addition, for all students entering at Level 4 before September 2022, we use two

different methods to work out overall marks and calculate which of these two methods would give the student the best possible degree classification. The two methods are explained to students under [Awards information](#). Both methods count the number of grades achieved at module level.

Briefly, the first method takes into account credits achieved at both Levels 5 and 6 (counting the best 120 credits taken from 60 credits at Level 5 and 120 credits taken at Level 6). The second takes into account the best 90 credits at Level 6 only.

Both methods remove the lower graded modules from the calculation used to classify an award. This means that if students underperform in their second year, their best third year modules can be used. If students underperform in their third year, their best second year modules can be used as described above. Again, this is a fair and genuinely inclusive means of calculating a degree classification and demonstrates that, even before the pandemic, we have sought to ensure that our students can obtain the result that best reflects their overall performance, even where they may unexpectedly underperform at either Level 5 or Level 6.

We have now completed a comprehensive review of our approach to the degree classification which has taken account of the outcome classification descriptors for Level 6 in the OfS sector-recognised standards, and the UKSCQA publication '[Principles for Effective Degree Algorithm Design](#)' (July 2020).

For all new students entering at Level 4 from September 2022 who are due to graduate in 2024/25, two updated methods will be used to calculate degree classifications. The first uses the profile of 120 credits attained at Level 5 and 120 credits attained at Level 6. Grades are weighted on a ratio of 1:2. The second method uses the grade profile of 120 credits attained at Level 6 only.

This new approach removes the process of discounting modules and places greater emphasis on exit velocity. Our regulations do not permit compensation or condonement of modules, and there is no provision for 'borderlines' or discretionary 'lifting' of grades by examination boards. We expect this to have a stabilising influence on the proportion of first-class degrees awarded.

Alongside our reviewed algorithm, we continue to identify classification profiles at course level to identify any that appear to be significantly out of line with the University average and/or sector averages. This is work-in-progress and stands alongside the work we have undertaken over the last five or more years to improve assessment and the consistency of marking practices.

## **5 Teaching practices and learning resources**

The University is committed to creating and sustaining the conditions that enable all students to benefit from an educational experience which is intellectually, socially and personally transformative (see our current [Strategic Plan](#)). We are committed to ensuring that our management of academic quality is enhancement-focused and over the last period has included improvements related to teaching resources, student support and curriculum and assessment design. Some of the enhancements that are likely to have had a positive effect on degree outcomes include:

- strengthening of the personal academic tutor system as articulated in our [Personal Academic Tutor Policy](#) to focus on supporting student engagement and academic progression
- increased emphasis on both initial and continuing professional development of staff to achieve professional recognition (FHEA) and accredited HE teaching qualifications
- focus in course design on clear course aims and learning outcomes with explicitly aligned learning, teaching and assessment strategies, improving the quality and consistency of

feedback to students through strategies for early formative assessment, course specific feedback policies, systematising standardisation of marking and ensuring use of the full range of grades as recommended by external examiners

- implementation of inclusive approaches to assessment that provide students with some choice in the mode of assessment, provision of support for academic writing skills, and of authentic assessments that involve application of learning to real world problems
- developmental work on academic integrity to increase awareness and understanding on the part of students and staff.

We are pleased with the recent [TEF results](#) which endorsed the very high quality of our teaching and learning and assessment practices and the outstanding quality of our learning resources in supporting students to achieve.

## **6 Identifying good practice and actions**

As indicated in previous sections of this statement, we have set key actions as part of our annual institutional Quality Enhancement Plan.

Over the last three years we have supported all courses to review their assessment criteria and grade descriptors/rubrics to ensure that they reflect sector recognized standards as set out in University generic descriptors for each level of study. We have placed significant emphasis on course teams ensuring consistency in the provision of constructive feedback on student work to enable students to improve.

External examiners are provided with detailed data on course related classification profiles for all Honours degrees across the University. We are exploring how we can provide external examiners with time-series classification data at course/subject level and specifically ask for commentary on this, as a means of guarding against inflation. We have also reviewed practice against the recently published QAA principles for external examining in 2022/23.

Going forwards we are now actively considering how the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) impacts on student assessments. Advice and guidance are being provided for staff and students, and Schools have been asked to review assessments strategies in the light of these developments. We are actively sharing good practice internally and externally.

## **7 Concluding Statement**

We continue to maintain strong oversight of the proportions of classifications awarded to our students both at subject and University level. We do not have high levels of 'unexplained' increase in proportions of first and upper second-class honours.

The adjustments we made to our assessment to deal with the challenges of the pandemic, were based on pragmatic changes to the nature of the assessments and providing more time together with a 'safety net' in the event of failure rather than 'no detriment'. This may have been associated with a small rise in the proportion of first-class honours awarded.

Over the last three years we have mapped our assessment and grading criteria to the sector recognised standards and asked all subjects areas to review their criteria to align with these. We are providing more information to our external examiners so that they can comment on grade profiles and we continue to provide support for our staff in relation to the design and management of assessment and standards. We have also completed a review of our approach to classification and

agreed a modified approach which will come into effect for our 2024/25 graduates. The modifications have been guided by sector-supported principles on degree algorithms.

We recognize that there are challenges arising from ongoing sector wide issues such as awarding gaps, and from new issues such as GenAI that we need to address.

We remain confident that the awards achieved by our students are appropriate and fair, largely as a result of our commitment to focus on inclusive assessment design and on standardisation, moderation and marking and feedback practices. External examiners consistently commend the University's approaches in this regard, commenting regularly and positively on innovation in assessment, the thorough processes for moderation and the quality of feedback provided to students.

January 2024